Wired News

Screens, Memes, Art Themes
by James Oliver Cury

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NEW YORK -- Apple Computer, the company that encourages us to "think different," would likely be pleased to see what a bunch of artists in a downtown art space have done with a few Macs and a lot of creativity. Taking the universal themes of love, loss, and alienation, artists have created new forms of video, CD-ROM, and Internet art.

Manhattan's Silicon Alley has finally crossed paths with the SoHo art scene.

Harvestworks and Thundergulch are hosting the *Screens and Memes* technology-based exhibition at the Harvestworks Digital Media Art Center, a nonprofit space for experimental artists.

The show, which runs through 19 September, features works by nine artists: Tina LaPorta, Art Jones, Lynn Hershamn, Mary Lucier, Jaron Lanier, Steina Vasulka, Zoe Beloff, Troika Ranch, and Tennessee Rice Dixon.

At first glance, the one-room exhibit appears to be a typical office, with several Macs sitting on desks. But the curators have dimmed the lights and produced laminated cards describing not only the artists and their work, but also suggesting how to interact with the pieces.

Art has always been subject to the interpretation of its audience. That's as true for the non-interactive videos -- like the ones presented by Hershman, Lucier, and Vasulka -- as it is for the CD-ROMs developed by Beloff, Jones, and Dixon. But while the straightforward videos simply play in endless loops on monitors, the technology-oriented pieces purposefully play with variables -- even unexpected technical glitches -- that can draw new meanings out of the works.

On opening night, Tennessee Rice Dixon was still futzing with her *Count* installation, which was running slower than she wanted. The piece resembles an abstract CD-ROM game, with photos, videos, numbers, and words floating across the screen. Think Myst plus a Peter Gabriel video, with a little Jenny Holzer wordplay thrown in.

The piece moves forward in a serial progression until the viewer -- who must wear headphones and a microphone -- comes to certain moments requiring voice feedback. Dixon never indicates when or how to speak or what your voice will do. Experimentation is part of the design.

"This has a lot to do with evolution and time and progression," says Dixon. She said she intends the piece to be somewhat slow and deliberate but worries some visitors will move on before getting the whole picture.

Ironically, one of the ill-behaving features in *Count* actually comes across as an artistic merit. "That's not what I desired," Dixon says, explaining that viewers are not supposed to hear their own voices while journeying through the work. Yet, this was one of the things that people liked most.

"It's like a future mix of past and future," says Senia Tomas, who is visiting from Spain and spends her days perusing New York galleries. "I feel like I was inside the visuals because you can talk and you hear

your own voice. And you live in the world she shows you." Dixon's traveling companion, Chloe Ho, agrees: "I like the sound effects. At the same time, I can hear my voice so I become one with the art."

Beloff's *Where Where There There Where* , for example, combines audio, black-and-white videos, and 360-degree panoramic views, all of which viewers are invited to manipulate. Jones' *Culture Versus the Martians* CD-ROM requires users to help scroll text as animated boxers and music fight for viewer attention.

Artist Tina LaPorta, who has worked with video and Net-based art, says that technical limitations affect her work as much as any creative impulses. After receiving complaints about the download time of the QuickTime videos in her *Traces* piece, LaPorta dumped QuickTime movies and switched to Shockwave for her second piece, *Shifting* , only to hear exasperated users around the world contest her use of plug-ins.

In her most recent work, *Translate Express* , LaPorta experiments with hypertext structure, moving away from loops and into branching. All three works explore "presence and essence -- projecting out a presence through your physical absence, which the Internet is based on," she says. And all three are posted online at wintermute.aec.at/traces, www.users.interport.net/~laporta, and at mitpress.mit.edu/LEA/GALLERY/gallery.html.

Troika Ranch, a dance and theater company, avoided download issues by first posting dance-oriented still images on its site every day for a year between 1 November 1996 to 31 October 1997. Then it combined all of these into one 36-second-long animated GIF that still resides online.

In conjunction with *Screens and Memes* , Harvestworks and Thundergulch are also hosting an Internet performance called *Loose Ends/Connections* that will combine improvisations with pretaped work in one RealPlayer stream on 19 September at 8:00 pm.

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